



DANSK INSTITUT FOR INTERNATIONALE STUDIER
STRANDGADE 56 • 1401 København K
32 69 87 87 • diis@diis.dk • www.diis.dk

DIIS Brief

The Danish Ugly Duckling and the Mohammed Cartoons

Ulla Holm
February 2006

Abroad, Denmark is for the time being considered an ugly duckling in international politics because of the publication of the cartoons on Mohammed. This perception of Denmark has shocked the political establishment and the population, because Denmark has had until now a very good reputation in international politics. This brief argues that the construction of Danish national identity as a homogeneous, harmonious ethnic entity makes it difficult for Danish governments to conduct foreign policy that takes into consideration other cultures. The Danish vision of being morally superior to other countries because of its welfare state and egalitarian politics enhances this attitude to other countries. The question is therefore how Denmark may become a swan again.

Ulla Holm, Phd. Cultural and European Studies,
MA French and Danish Literature and Language
Senior Researcher, Department of European Studies, DIIS

The Danish Ugly Duckling and the Mohammed Cartoons

By Ulla Holm

“It was lovely summer weather in the country, and the golden corn, the green oats, and the haystacks piled up in the meadows looked beautiful...A duck sat on her nest, watching for her young brood to hatch....At length one shell cracked, and then another. “ How large the world is,” said the young ducks...” Do you imagine this is the whole world?” asked the mother; “Wait till you have seen the garden; it stretches far beyond that to the parson’s field, but I have never ventured to such a distance”... At last the one large egg broke, and a young one crept forth. It was very large and ugly.... The mother said; “he is not pretty: but he has a very good disposition, and swims as well or even better than the others. I think he will grow up pretty, and perhaps be smaller; he has remained too long in the egg, and therefore his figure is not properly formed....” (The Ugly Duckling by Hans Christian Andersen, 1844)

What went wrong in the State of Denmark?

In Danish homes, in streets and shops, everybody is discussing why the publication of 12 cartoons in the newspaper *Jyllandsposten* in September 2005 has resulted in anger against Denmark. Until New Year 2006, the Danish government’s insistence not to interfere in the question of limits to the freedom of the press, was not very much contested. But all of a sudden, the silence was broken. Voices from abroad and from the inside of Denmark questioned the government’s handling of ‘the affair’.

Let me shortly sketch out the course of “events”:

Especially one of the cartoons stirred up anger among some Muslim organisations in Denmark. It showed Muhammed with a bomb-shaped turban. A week after the publication, Spokesmen for Denmark’s conservative *Islamic Faith Community* demanded an apology from *Jyllandsposten*. The newspaper refused and some weeks after, eleven ambassadors from Muslim countries requested a meeting with the Danish Prime Minister, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, to discuss government action against *Jyllandsposten*. Mr. Fogh Rasmussen declined the request arguing that freedom of speech and of the press was a sacrosanct pillar of democracy and therefore not up for discussion. The outcome of this refusal was double fold: A delegation from *the Islamic Faith Community* travelled around the Middle East in order to conduct meetings with religious leaders about how to react to the cartoons. Nearly at the same time, 22 former Danish ambassadors to Muslim countries deplored the prime minister’s ignorance of diplomatic niceties. At the end of December, discussions on whether there has to be restraints on freedom of speech entered the Danish public debate. As a consequence, Mr. Fogh Rasmussen, in his New Year’s address to the nation, emphasized the importance of freedom of speech, religious freedom, and mutual respect.

At the beginning of the debate, hardly anybody contested the concept of freedom of press as being a stable and well-defined concept. Seemingly, it is linked to the concept of democracy, which is supposedly well-defined too. The debate was thus discursively constructed in binary terms: either you are *for* freedom of speech or you must be *against*. In the latter case, it is assumed that you are non-democratic, because the essence of liberal democracy is freedom of speech.

Since the New Year, the hitherto dominant discourse on the sacrosanct freedom of the press has been challenged by a discourse on the necessity of linking freedom of speech to tolerance/respect of other cultures and religions. The two discourses transcend political affiliations, and therefore the political parties in Denmark have difficulties in taking a clear-cut position.

The most prominent carrier of the discourse of tolerance and respect is Mr. Uffe Elleman-Jensen, former Minister of Foreign Affairs and former leader of the Liberal Party (Venstre) whose present leader is the Prime Minister, Fogh Rasmussen. Already in October 2005, he warned against lack of understanding for minorities and their religion. The hitherto culmination of his warning was published February 8 in the conservative newspaper *Berlingske Tidende*:

“If we Danes wish to preserve dialogue with other cultures and religions – and even wish that they buy our milk products – then we cannot demand that they accept all our norms, least of all when they are exposed to disdain, mockery and sarcasm. If we insist that they have to tolerate all that, we are all firmly anchored in ‘the Danish village pond’ where everybody is convinced of her/his own infallibility and therefore not able to get on in a globalised world” (*Berlingske Tidende*, February 8, 2006).

This statement by the former Minister of Foreign Affairs provoked an enormous debate in Danish society. Common for the debate is the question of integration of Muslims, of democracy and the status of religion in a secular nation-state.

Since the current liberal/conservative government (with support from the extreme Right) came into power in 2001, the immigration policies have become extremely tough. What is called the ‘tone of the debate’ on immigrants, especially Muslim immigrants – is harsh too. The extreme Right refers to Muslim immigrants as ‘the fifth column’ or the ‘Trojan Horse’. Moreover, a discriminatory law has been adopted; the so-called 24 –years-rule. It prevents Danish citizens from obtaining living permits in Denmark for foreign spouses if either of the parties is under 24 years of age. Furthermore, Danish-foreign couples must fulfill an “attachment-criteria”, showing that their common attachment to Denmark is stronger than their common attachment to any other country, i.e. the spouse’s country of origin. The ‘tone’ of the debate and these laws have resulted in criticism from domestic opposition and abroad. For example, the High Commissioner for Human Rights of the European Council, Mr. Alvaro Gil-Robles, January 17, 2006, concluded that there is a rather high level of intolerance in the Danish society, on the political arena and in the media. Furthermore, he criticized the government’s proposal of replacing ‘Religious

instruction' at school by 'Christian studies'. One of the Ministers responded that no foreign body should interfere in Danish internal affairs.

The government's difficulties in handling the current row over cartoons is linked to the Danish perception of state and nation: The Danish state being seen as an arche-type of a nation-state and the Danish nation being defined as an ethnic imagined community whose cultural survival is guaranteed by the state, which through the formulation of laws takes care of the cultural assimilation of immigrants into Danish cultural values. The concept of cultural homogeneity is thus the most important definitional element in the construction of the Danish nation.

However, the fact that around 250.000 immigrants – especially from Muslim countries - are now living in Denmark (the Danish population is 5.3 million), challenges the concept of the Danish nation-state based on cultural homogeneity. Suddenly it seems that the Danes have discovered that the younger generation of Muslim immigrants consciously challenges the cultural homogeneity of the nation – state.

Some sections of the Danish population (part of the Social Democratic Party, part of the Conservative and Liberal Parties, the whole extreme Right and part of the extreme Left) consider the criticism of the cartoons by some Muslim organisations as a confirmation of all Muslims' lack of will to assimilation. This perception is now challenged by many Muslims who both criticize the conservative Muslim organisations as well as the Danish government. They wish to find a way out of the binary constructed discursive order: Cultural Danes against cultural Muslims. Secular Danes against religious Muslims. Democratic Danes against undemocratic Muslims. This movement has gained support from many ethnic Danes too; Demonstrations, new websites, conferences, petitions, open letters to the government flourish for the time being. The impact of the publication of the cartoons may now reconstruct what Danish identity is all about.

Denmark: an Activist Internationalist Actor

Danish embassies in Indonesia, Syria, Lebanon and Iran, have been set on fire and the staff has been threatened. As a consequence, the embassies have been evacuated and Denmark is no longer represented in these important Muslim countries.

These events should be seen in the light of the fact that Danish governments are not used to being heavily criticised by other governments and populations. Generally, Denmark has had a good reputation in the international community because Denmark has succeeded in representing itself at the international arena as a country preferring peaceful dialogue, diplomacy, peace-keeping and development aid as opposed to offensive military means, this in spite of Danish involvement in the first Gulf war in 1991 and the occupation of Iraq.

The Danish party leaders talk about Denmark being in its worst external-political situation since the Second World War. Some researchers believe that the protests against the cartoons will signify an enormous backlash for Danish Foreign policy (Ole Wæver,

Politiken, February 8, 2006). If this scenario will indeed be the case, the representation of Denmark as an activist foreign policy actor will be seriously damaged. Ole Wæver even suggests that Denmark has to keep a low profile, especially in the Middle East, because Denmark is now stigmatized. Of course, the Prime Minister rebuffed that “Denmark will not become an introvert country. We will continue to maintain our key values both in Denmark and abroad” (Fogh Rasmussen, *Politiken*, February 11, 2006)

In the 1990s the watch-word for Danish foreign policy was ‘active internationalism’. It pointed to an ambitious doctrine demanding a high level of international engagement on the one hand, and, on the other, a will to commit actively to the internationalist goals and principles of the UN. This activism became even more distinct after the coming into power of the coalition of the Danish Conservative Party and the Liberal Party, supported by the extreme Right in 2001. In June 2003, the Danish Government presented A *Changing World – The Government’s Vision for New Priorities in Denmark’s Foreign Policy*. This strategy defines the primary goal of Danish foreign policy as the promotion of Denmark’s security and prosperity based on a set of fundamental values. The central values are the individual, the community, freedom, democracy and security. The strategy emphasises that Denmark should exert maximum influence on the world around us, based on these values.

This activist strategy has implied direct involvement in the occupation of Iraq and in Afghanistan. Right now, in February 2006, the government is discussing whether Denmark has to comply with U.S.’ demands for further Danish involvement in Afghanistan. Until the burning of Danish embassies in the Middle East and in Indonesia, there was a wide-spread parliamentarian support for sending more soldiers to Afghanistan, and to prolong the stationing of soldiers in Iraq. But after the demonstration in Basra, it is not at all given that Danish forces in Iraq will not be withdrawn. If this happens, the activist foreign policy is ruined in the eyes of the government.

The government has also tried to conduct an active policy in the Middle East by means of export of democracy and human rights. In 2003, the Danish Government launched the *Wider Middle East Initiative* similar to other democratic promotion initiatives from the US and the EU. The Wider Middle East Initiative was supplemented by *Arab Initiative*. The aim of this initiative is: “fruitful cooperation with the Arab countries south of the Mediterranean in order to solve common problems, and to create common possibilities that only can be established by creation of mutual respect, tolerance and understanding for the historical and actual conditions for development in each country and in the region” (Det Arabiske Initiativ (the Arab Initiative). Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Copenhagen, January 2005).

The initiative might well get into political trouble in the Arab countries because of the cartoons. Hence, the ambitious Danish initiative, whose purpose was to show that Denmark cares about the EU’s neighbours even if they are not geographically Denmark’s neighbours, might be put on standby.

Conclusion: The Danish Ugly Duckling

The Danish Minister of Foreign Affairs has declared that Denmark is in the worst foreign policy crisis since Second World War. This is not wrong at all. But it is also an internal crisis because the crisis is about national identity. The cartoons have revealed that there exists a close linkage between the domestic and the international sphere, and that foreign policy is about how nation-states perceive themselves on the internal arena.

All school kids have read the fairy tale *the Ugly Duckling* by Hans Christian Andersen. It belongs to the national literary heritage. From childhood on, Danes learn that Denmark is a cosy and peaceful agricultural corner. It might appear at first glance that Danes are ugly because they have too big heads, but with age they learn how to behave gracefully and civilized. The fairy tale tells the Danes that they grow up to 'swim' even better than other swans. This perception is linked to a vision of the Danish state-nation being more democratic than other nation-states due to the welfare state and tradition of political anti-elitism and egalitarianism. Danish governments therefore consider it a moral right to exercise influence beyond the Danish borders.

This self-perception is however shattered now because the Danish state-nation did not take into consideration that other state-nations and other societies do not consider Danish foreign policies as the best policies in the world.

Dr. Ulla Holm
DIIS (Danish Institute for International Studies)
Department of European Studies
Strandgade 56
1401 Copenhagen K
Denmark
uho@diis.dk